

A black and white photograph of Coach Beckie Francis, a woman with long dark hair, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus.

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Official Magazine of the Women's Basketball Coaches Association

Breaking the Silence

**Oakland coach Beckie Francis urges
survivors of childhood sexual abuse
to help others by speaking out**

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'I will be silent no more'

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse can best help themselves and others by speaking out about what happened to them.

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ON THE COVER: Oakland University head coach Beckie Francis. Photo by Oakland University Athletics.

Cover Story

Oakland University head coach Beckie Francis, a vocal survivor of childhood sexual abuse, has a message for her fellow victims...

A black and white photograph of a hand with the index finger pointing upwards, set against a dark, textured background.

'Tell! Te

By Beckie Francis, Head Coach, Oakland University



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y | Photos courtesy of Oakland University Athletics



Beckie Francis is in her 13th season as head coach at Oakland University. Including her three years at Stony Brook University, Francis began the 2012-13 season with a career win-loss record of 248-190. She resides with her husband, Gary Russi, in Rochester, Mich.

Anybody who has watched the cartoon show "Popeye" knows the truth: you don't mess with the sailor man after he's had his spinach.

Popeye always looked out for his friend Olive Oyl, and never would let anything bad happen to her. He was pretty patient until it looked like something really terrible was coming. Then he'd open his magic can of spinach, eat it, grow bulging bicep muscles and say, "I've had all I can stand and can't stand no more." He then would spring into action.

This is my "Popeye" moment, to borrow an idea from Bill Hybels in his book "Holy Discontent." Hybels defines holy discontent as the issue or cause that burns deep in our soul and makes us really angry when we see it on television or in the news. My holy discontent is childhood sexual abuse.

I cannot stand that everyone is afraid to talk about it. I am incensed when I hear about people wanting to sweep it under the rug. I want to break the code of silence and help those who live in a sad and unnecessary world of shame and blame.

I know something about this topic because I am a survivor; it happened to me. I was sexually abused for a number of years. I felt ashamed, embarrassed and did everything in my power to keep it a secret.

I have always used sports to escape, but I also started dealing with the pain through therapy sessions and faith. I am now a happy and healthy Division I women's basketball coach. I feel free and I have a wonderful sense of peace.

I want to make a difference by sharing information with coaches, administrators, athletes, parents, teachers, trainers, club coaches, fans, and with people who have been abused.

I wish I had had an adult, coach or teacher who knew the key warning signs that can alert you that a child is being molest-

ed. Some of these clues include: kids who are hyperactive, afraid to be alone, always clinging, dressed promiscuously, exhibiting low self-confidence, questioning themselves, or trying to undress themselves to show off body parts at inappropriate times and places.

I am not alone in being a vocal survivor. I have drawn inspiration from writer Erin Merryn and Sen. Scott Brown (R-Mass.).

Merryn, 27, is going state to state to help enact legislation known as "Erin's Law," which aims to establish age-appropriate curricula on "safe" touch and "unsafe" touch to protect kids. She has appeared on Oprah and other national shows to talk about Erin's Law. Says Merryn: "Our schools have plenty of fire drills, bus drills and tornado drills. Kids know how to run out of burning buildings, but no one is teaching kids how to get away and how to tell today."

Brown helped me find a lot of the courage to stop being ashamed and to speak out to protect kids. One evening my husband and I were watching the news. Scrolling across the bottom of the screen was "Sen. Scott Brown abused by camp counselor - Details in his book 'Against All Odds.'" I purchased a copy of the book soon after and read it cover to cover. I found it astounding that a U.S. Senator would talk about being a victim of sexual abuse.

Speaking out about what happened to me, and my quest to help others, has been challenging. Some have discouraged me, for fear of how it would affect me professionally.

To me, this is precisely the reason to write about it. The stigma and shame associated with sexual child abuse prevents kids from telling. We need to educate kids so that they feel free to tell what happened to them.

Sexual abuse is happening everywhere -- in homes, backyards and right in your own community. It is in churches, schools, buses, playgrounds, locker rooms and showers.

The statistics are startling. One in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused by the age of 18, and more than 90 percent of sexual abuse is committed by a family member or an adult the victim knows. I repeat: the perpetrator is almost always someone the child knows.

Parents should be very careful and aware that abuse can come from family members. Parents let their guard down when their kids are with uncles, cousins, fathers, brothers and sisters. Coaches, clergy and the "friendly" family neighbor are other potential abusers to look out for. We teach our children about "stranger


danger," but we do not educate and warn kids about the people they come in contact with every day.

My message and Erin's message to kids is simple.

Tell! Tell! Tell!

Kids must be told to tell a parent, teacher or coach what is happening to them. If anyone touches them inappropriately, they should not be ashamed. It is not their fault and they did not ask for it.

Often times, victims do not tell until their adult years for fear of shame and the attached stigma. Keeping this secret can lead to anxiety, depression, alcoholism, drug abuse and multiple stress-related issues. I encourage all victims of abuse to tell somebody and seek out the help of a qualified therapist.



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Administrators should screen their coaches in more ways than a simple background check. Coaches who tend to be predators use the coaching profession to get access to kids. If coaches act "creepy," are "icky," stare inappropriately, fondle, tickle or grope, it should be addressed.

We coach to teach and educate athletes, but our first goal should be to provide a safe environment to play and learn the game. Report unusual behavior, watch closely coaches who look at pornography or who drink excessively. Teach your female athletes self-defense and hold awareness days.

I have a gentle word of advice and encouragement to the survivors reading this. I know there are many of you. There is a freedom that comes with speaking out, speaking up, and sharing the truth about being abused. The shame and embar-

rassment goes away with time, with therapy and faith. I used to wake up every morning having this feeling that something was "wrong" and had a huge weight on my shoulders. Now I am free and alive.

I will be silent no longer. I hope the coaching profession can be a part of the discussion about - and solution to - how to stop abuse and help the victims. I am pleased to lend my voice in support of the kids and older survivors who can't speak up yet.



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10/18/2012 12:40 PM

Oakland U coach breaks silence about sexual abuse

LARRY LAGE



ROCHESTER, Mich. (AP) — Beckie Francis remembers sitting on her couch last year, staring in amazement as she watched Sen. Scott Brown of Massachusetts reveal on TV that he was a survivor of sexual abuse.

Francis turned to her husband and told him she could do the same thing.

The women's basketball coach at Oakland University shared her story with parishioners at her suburban Detroit church, and with her players. And now, she is telling everyone else in hopes that it will encourage victims of sexual abuse to seek help, and to assist parents and children to avoid what she

endured.

Until now, Francis had not publicly disclosed said that she was sexually assaulted by her dad, who is now deceased, from the age of 4 until she was in the seventh grade. Francis says she doesn't know when her dad died and can't recall the last time she saw him because she blocked him out of her life and mind after the abuse he inflicted on her.

The 47-year-old coach decided to come forward to speak out against the problem, in part because of the Jerry Sandusky scandal at Penn State.

"It's not easy to talk about," Francis said in an interview with The Associated Press. "It's something I tried to hold back and hide because I was afraid of what people would think. It's to a

ON-AIR



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point now, where situations are coming out in the media with all kinds of cases from schools, churches, everywhere and I'm tired of it."

And, Francis is trying to do something about it.

She agreed to emcee an event on Oakland's campus on Thursday night featuring Erin Merryn, who was sexually abused as a child and now campaigns for increased education and protection from sexual predators. While Francis has been inspired by Brown and Merryn to go public with her past plight, the politician and the advocate are thrilled to have the coach on their team.

"Since telling my own story of abuse, I've been struck by the number of people who say they have drawn strength from it," Brown said. "It is humbling and gratifying to know that I may have given coach Francis the courage to speak out about the abuse she suffered."

Merryn travels around the nation to get versions of "Erin's Law" passed in all 50 states to require schools to adopt policy and create a curriculum that, among other things, would help children understand and talk about sexual abuse. The legislation has been introduced in many states, including Michigan, and enacted in four: Illinois — where the 27-year-old Merryn is from — Missouri, Indiana and Maine, she said.

"It always a help when you have a public figure like Beckie, especially at a university, to come forward like this to encourage other people to not keep their story a secret," Merryn said.

Sandusky's secret was exposed nearly a year ago and the former Penn State assistant football coach was sentenced this month to 30 to 60 years in prison. He was found guilty of raping or fondling boys in a child sex-abuse scandal that disgraced the school, forced the ouster of coach Joe Paterno and brought unprecedented penalties from the NCAA.

Penn State is hosting a child sexual abuse conference later this month. Merryn plans to be there to share information about "Erin's Law" and sign copies of her two books.

"It's good that Penn State is trying to do something positive instead of shoving it under the rug, but at this point, they don't have a choice," Merryn said. "It's unfortunate that it look something like the tragedy at Penn State to bring the world's attention to the monsters, who 93 percent of the time are somebody you trust with your kids, that are in every community."

Francis' path toward going public got a jolt when she heard about Merryn trying to get legislation named after her passed in Michigan. The two women quickly connected and an invite was extended to Merryn by the school to come to campus for a speaking engagement endorsed by the school's administration, which includes Francis' husband, Oakland University President Gary Russi.

The school planned to have counselors on hand to provide support and referrals for anyone after what was expected to be an emotional night.

Francis didn't tell her mother what happened until she was in her 30s, about 15 years ago. Her mom, she said, was "shocked and angry" about what happened in Germantown, N.Y., where Francis was born, raised and abused.

Francis, who has won 184 Division I games over 10 seasons, took the team to the 2002 NCAA tournament — only to resign after the season because of ulcerative colitis she later attributed to stress from the abuse she tried to forget. Francis was rehired for the 2005-06 season and led the Golden Grizzlies back to the NCAA tournament.

"Reflecting back, I do believe the fact that I didn't deal with my abuse affected my health and led to my health- and stress-related resignation," Francis said. "During that time away from coaching, I bawled for the first time in my life with therapists and became a Christian."

With professional help and her strong faith, Francis walks and talks with a powerful conviction — confident and comfortable — about her past and her hopes.

"I was in total denial until maybe my 30s, and that's another example of why I want to talk about this," she said. "I know that people are so embarrassed, and they think, 'Oh, I'm just going to forget about it. It was in the past. Move on. Buck up. Suck it up.' But there are so many things. It can affect your health. It just affects your confidence.

"And since I have just let it go, I am happier and healthier than I have ever been. I am totally free."

Associated Press writers Mike Householder in Detroit and Jeff Karoub in Lansing, Mich., contributed to this report.

Follow Larry Lage on Twitter at www.Twitter.com/larrylage

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Sarah Preisinger <preisin2@oakland.edu>

Fwd: Coverage

5 messages

From: Theodore Montgomery <tmontgom@oakland.edu>

Date: October 24, 2012 8:25:08 AM EDT

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<http://www.790thezone.com/news/article.aspx?id=3487018>

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